

Portland State University

PDXScholar

History Faculty Publications and Presentations

History

9-2015

Book Review of, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1788*

James Grehan

Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/hist_fac



Part of the [Political History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

James Grehan. Review of Winter, Stefan, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1788*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stefan Winter. *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1788.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xii + 204 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76584-8.

Reviewed by James Grehan

Published on H-Levant (September, 2015)

Commissioned by Laila Parsons

Anyone who has ever studied early modern Lebanese history soon descends into a welter of names, battles, intrigues, and rapidly shifting alliances and enmities. The challenges to the historian who would write about this period are numerous and formidable, and complicated by the highly politicized uses to which many of the sources have been put in modern times. Among the most tell-tale topics is the depiction of Lebanese Shiites, often relegated to the margins of Ottoman Lebanese history. With meticulous attention to detail, Stefan Winter has waded into this contentious historiography and produced a fine work of scholarship. Readers are unlikely to put down his study without coming to a new understanding of early modern Lebanon and the Shiite leaders who, working inside an avowedly Sunni Muslim state, nonetheless played an active part in provincial politics.

Winter's main purpose is to hammer away at what he calls the "Lebanist" historiography. As its proponents would have it, Lebanon has long constituted a virtual proto-nation with its own distinct history and identity. The Ottomans were the last in a long line of "hostile outsiders" who would vainly try to interfere and impose their rule over this doughty mountain refuge. Resisting these external oppressors was an emerging polity—what would later become the autonomous administrative district of Mt. Lebanon (1861-1914)—whose natural leaders were Maronite and Druze lords. Under this Druze-Maronite condominium, the narrative goes, the mountain largely tended to its own affairs and bided its time until it could finally assert itself as a full-fledged state.

Winter is not the first to take issue with this proto-national vision of Lebanese history. He joins a tradition of Lebanese historians—above all, Kamal Salibi and Ahmad Beydoun—who over the past generation have worked at exposing the modern political roots of this interpretation. Winter extends and broadens this estab-

lished line of questioning first by pushing it back to the early modern era, and then by recasting Lebanese history in a more properly Ottoman framework.

Setting him apart is his wide-ranging research in multiple archives. The older Lebanist scholarship worked mainly from local chronicles, many of which were set down in the nineteenth century. More than any other historian to date (with the exception of 'Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn), Winter has roamed far beyond the usual watering holes. He has not only consulted the standard chronicles, but read Islamic court records (from Tripoli and Sidon) and French consular correspondence. More striking still is his extensive use of the Ottoman archives in Istanbul, where he has patiently combed through imperial edicts and fiscal records.

The resulting study succeeds in weaving local and imperial perspectives into a much fuller narrative than we are used to getting. It allows Winter to compile a larger number of reports than earlier authors, sort through conflicting versions of events, and sniff out early attempts at rewriting the past. No less important is the scope of his narrative. Early modern Lebanon cannot make full sense, he rightly tells us, without reference to the larger Ottoman political system. It may sound like a truism to the casual reader, but scholarship has only begun to incorporate this insight, along with the requisite sources, over the last generation.

It is not only the Ottomans who have gone missing. Noticeably absent in Lebanist history, Winter observes, are the Shiite communities, who were found throughout much of the Lebanese highlands and heavily involved in the Ottoman political and fiscal system. In the northern regions, around Kisrawan and above Tripoli, were the tribesmen of the Hamada clan, who made themselves paramount tax-farmers from the late sixteenth century

until their power waned during the eighteenth century. The Harfushes were Shiite bosses in Baalbek and the Biqā' Valley, also on the scene by the late sixteenth century and not fully eclipsed until the mid-nineteenth century. In the southern hills of Jabal 'Amil, where the largest concentration of Shiites lived, were various local families who found their own niche in the Ottoman system, achieving their greatest ascendancy in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Winter's conclusions largely follow the consensus of recent research, which has stressed the Ottoman penchant for "pragmatism." His real accomplishment is to build up an extraordinarily detailed portrait of provincial administration which explains why they were pragmatic and exactly how they dealt with non-Sunni Muslims over a period of several centuries. His findings are consistent. Beneath the heated rhetoric about combating "heretics," which peaked in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman state was quite willing to make room for Shiite notables (as well as non-Muslims) inside the political establishment. Anti-Shiite fulmination took aim mainly at officials who had fallen from favor or strayed into open rebellion, not Shiite subjects as a social group. Religious persecution was rare and aberrant. The state's actions always flowed from the balance of imperial interests and local circumstances. There was no single "Shiite policy."

The Ottomans therefore had no compunction about working with Lebanese Shiites, who easily inserted themselves into the provincial administration. Only towards the late eighteenth century, at which point Winter closes his narrative, did a new political configuration arise, led by the Sunni Muslim Shihabi family (many of whom would secretly convert to Maronite Christianity), with the backing of Druze lords in the central part of the mountain and the newly triumphant Maronite clans of the northern districts. It is the nineteenth-century attempt to project this coalition further back in time—all the way to the "emirate" of Fakh al-Din al-Ma'n (r. 1590-1633)—which Winter spends most of his time trying to dismantle. He is fully able to show that this "emirate" was not the overlordship of the entire mountain that nineteenth-century chroniclers supposed, and that it served, and was created to serve, mainly Ottoman interests.

Winter's alertness to modern myth-making makes him equally skilled at detecting ideological agendas within early modern sources. As he repeatedly shows, it is not just a matter of nineteenth-century chronicles actively reshaping Lebanese history. Earlier authors,

too, sought to impose their own views and interests. Winter's handling of Istfan Duwayhi, the seventeenth-century Maronite patriarch who wrote one of the most important chronicles, astutely places the author amid the Maronite-Shiite feuds and conflicts of his time. Duwayhi fills his history with images of tyrannical Shiites (cast as "Iranian" interlopers) that still circulate in historical writing today. Though a small minority in Kisrawan, Winter explains, Shiite communities had been present there since at least late medieval times. Fueling Duwayhi's animosity was the slow rise of the Maronite notables, now beginning to contest the supremacy of their Hamada overlords. Reading his chronicle, one would never suspect that the Hamadas actually had a close relationship both with the Maronite Church and the Lebanese Order of Monks (founded in 1694). As late as the eighteenth century, the Shiite tribesmen could help to settle the selection of Maronite patriarchs; and with the same ease, they intervened in monastic affairs, actively throwing their weight behind the "Baladi" branch of the Order when a schism erupted (1754) with the rival "Aleppan" faction. For good measure, Winter relates the many customs and places of worship that Shiites shared with their Christian neighbors. Political alliances did not proceed from *realpolitik* alone. There was a social familiarity that needs to be recognized as well.

Winter takes such evident satisfaction in puncturing historical myths about Lebanon that he seems content to leave broader questions about Ottoman history as subsidiary themes. The attentive reader will find, here and there, well-worn terms borrowed from modernization studies (e.g., "centralization" and "rationalization") or an older and more insular tradition of Ottoman studies (e.g., "classical" and "post-classical" administration). He makes no fuss about them, presumably settling for a convenient shorthand that specialists would instantly recognize. Herein lies a missed opportunity. The sheer depth of his research makes him unusually well equipped to tell us whether these models actually match early modern administrative practice. He tends to get at these questions mostly in passing, dropping hints throughout the text about the evolution of provincial politics.

Winter is very good at presenting the early modern state as a different kind of political order. It was "heterogeneous" insofar as it tolerated—often not by choice—multiple and overlapping sources of authority and jurisdiction. Fully apparent at every turn is the Ottomans' famous penchant for "manipulation" and promotion of competition among provincial officials. Above all, the early modern state was contentious. No one who reads

Winter's account will look again for a sixteenth-century "golden age." From a very early date, turbulence was the rule (and probably the curse of all Mediterranean highlands). Officials at all levels were constantly searching for the right combination of bargains, threats, and blandishments to bring their underlings into line.

All this wheeling and dealing lent itself to a certain "flexibility"—another well-known characteristic of Ottoman governance. What Winter's research suggests is that political transformation was occurring sooner and more readily than models of "classical" government would have predicted. Among the interesting revelations is the rapid monetarization of provincial administration, fully underway by the 1570s, with local intermediaries like the Hamadas early on managing tax-farms and hiring their own private militias. With each reappointment to office, these middlemen were drawn ever more firmly into the Ottoman political order. Winter's close reading of tax registers turns up a "long-term evolution towards more consolidated structures of authority and governance" (p. 68). Far from fraying under stress (as Linda Darling has also argued), provincial administration was becoming more efficient.

Particularly incisive is his grasp of lateral politics. The anti-Ma'n alliance defeated (1623) at the battle of 'Anjar, for instance, consisted of the joint forces of the governor of Damascus, the Janissaries of Damascus, the Sunni Sayfas of Tripoli, and the Shiite Harfush emirs of the Biqa'. Their reasons for standing against the famous

Druze emir Fakhr al-Din had as much to do with their own calculations and interests as any command sent by the sultan. Provincial politics was always more than the sum of center-periphery relations. One of Winter's key points is that these lateral linkages multiplied across the Ottoman centuries. So dense and self-supporting had the networks become that local notables had largely taken over provincial administration by the eighteenth century. Winter tantalizingly suggests that there might be something more to this "decentralization" (as most historians continue to call it) than first meets the eye. Explaining the eighteenth-century decline of Shiite factions, he alludes to their rivals' success in cultivating political connections—or to put it another way, to their superior mastery of the provincial bureaucracy. Lateral linkages, he implies (in line with scholars like Engin Akarlı), remained anchored in an imperial framework even as administrative devolution became ever more pronounced.

Stefan Winter has written what is unquestionably a major contribution to the study of Ottoman Lebanon. In depth and breadth of research, combining local and imperial sources, it is a model for future scholarship. His marshaling of so much material and working it into a structured narrative is itself a labor that should earn the appreciation of all students of Lebanese history. It will serve as a valuable resource for scholars of state and religion in the Ottoman Empire, and will appeal to anyone who wants to better understand early modern Ottoman government.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant>

Citation: James Grehan. Review of Winter, Stefan, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1788*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44674>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.